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ABSTRACT

Stresses experienced by eight married couples when the husband is entering graduate school (Couples in Transition Project) were compared to stresses felt by eight couples who recently gave birth to their first child (Becoming a Family Project). Both projects were based at the University of California, Berkeley. In addition, eight couples who were neither having a baby nor going through the transition to graduate school were tested. An adaptation of the Holmes and Rahe Social Readjustment Rating Scale (1967) was used to measure presumptive life stress. Fifty-seven items were clustered within eight domains: the relationship with one's partner and events concerning friendship, finances, home (including relocation items), jobs, schooling, extended family, and other important events. Women in all three groups reported more life stress events than men. The graduate student couples experienced significantly more life stress events than the other two groups of couples, who did not differ significantly from each other. Arguments with partners were reported more often by the graduate school couples than by the other couples, and events concerning finances were also more frequently cited by the graduate school couples. As expected, events concerning moving, schooling, and major changes in living conditions, contributed to the stress scores for the graduate student couples. (SW)

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STRESSES ASSOCIATED WITH A MAJOR LIFE TRANSITION

Sheila Namir

While being in graduate school is often recognized as a stressful event, we are lacking an understanding of the exact nature of these stresses for the graduate students, the partners of graduate students, and the effects of these stresses on the couples relationship.

When graduate school stresses are combined with those associated with relocation to a new community, additional difficulties may ensue. The impact of relocation to a new community has been primarily studied by corporations concerned with relocating their executive staff members (Martin, 1975; Pierson, 1972). The stresses associated with relocation are well documented (Immundo, 1974), and include the difficulties in establishing close ties in a new community; spouses depending on each other more, changes in routine, climate, jobs, relationships and the disequilibrium which may result from these changes.

Those in the academic world are another group of chronic movers (Packard, 1975). In addition to the stresses associated with relocation, the academic world has pressures and problems that may be unique contributors to stress. For the graduate student, the need to achieve and maintain a high level of involvement and performance is great. There is a highly structured world for students in terms of time commitments, responsibilities and the completion of products. Socially, students are in daily contact with other people in the academic community, and the process of learning, discovering and doing research becomes all absorbing. The non-academic member of the couple may feel extremely peripheral to this process. If the non-student partners' lives lack the structure and goal-directed purpose that their spouses' lives have, the gulf between the partners' worlds may begin to cause difficulties in their relationship.

An expected stress for the partners of graduate students is suggested by Welch and Booth (1977). They found that two groups of married women exhibited the greatest signs of stress: those who recently took a job and those who formerly held a job and were now unemployed. These categories are common in academic communities. Partners who have already developed careers and then choose to accompany their spouses to graduate school are often unable to find a job. Furthermore, the partner of a graduate student is often forced by situational factors, such as debts to pay or support of the family, to take a job as soon as one is found even if it is one in which he or she feels underemployed.

We attempted to understand if the stresses associated with this life transition were different from those associated with another life transition, and what might be contributing to such differences. We compared this transition to graduate school and relocation with another major life transition - the birth of a first child. Data were available from the Becoming a Family Project - a research and intervention project developed by Carolyn and Phil Cowan at the University of California, Berkeley. The project was designed to focus on the relationship of couples during the transition to parenthood.

Method

Participants in the current study were the eight couples from the Couples in Transition Project. Sixteen couples randomly selected from the Becoming a Family Project were used as comparison couples. Eight couples had given birth to their first child during the previous six months to a year. The mean age was 32 for the males and 30 for the females. The average length of their relation-

ships was a little over three years. The other eight couples used in this study were couples from the Becoming a Family Project who were not having a baby nor going through the transition to graduate school. Their mean ages were 28 for the males and 27 for the females. Thus, these participants not having a baby in the Becoming a Family Project are quite comparable to the graduate student couples. The couples with a new baby are on the average two to four years older.

An adaptation of the Holmes and Rahe Social Readjustment Rating Scale(1967) was used to measure presumptive life stress. The modifications were based on suggestions by other researchers (Horowitz, Schafer, Hiroto, Wilner and Levin, 1977)that scores for life events be weighted based on temporal proximity with declining weights as events are further in the past. Fifty-seven items were used clustered within eight different domains: the relationship with one's partner, events concerning friendship, finances, home (including relocation items), jobs, schooling, extended family and other important events.

Life stress scores of men and women partners from the Couples in Transition Project and the Becoming a Family Project were compared in an analysis of variance. Women in all three groups clearly reported more life stress events than men (the mean for females was 390.21 compared to a mean score of 280.54 for males, $F(1, 42) = 6.39$, $p < .05$).

The graduate student couples experienced significantly more life stress events than the couples from the Becoming a Family Project. The baby and the no baby couples from that project did not differ significantly from each other ($F(2, 42) = 4.34$, $p < .05$; mean score of 423.81 for Couples in Transition participants, 274.81 and 307.5 for baby and no baby couples).

Frequencies were tabulated for the main domains of events on the stress inventory to further understand which events were contributing to the differential stress scores. Within the relationship domain, arguments with partners were reported more often by the graduate school couples than by the Becoming a Family couples. Events concerning finances were also more frequently endorsed by the graduate school couples than by the couples in the other two groups. As expected, events concerning moving and major changes in living conditions, and events concerning schooling, were contributing to the stress scores for the graduate student couples.

For seven of the eight domains, the women in the study endorsed items more frequently than the men. The only items endorsed more by the men concerned schooling, and since all the men in the Couples in Transition project were the graduate students, this was not a surprising finding. The biggest difference in items endorsed by the men and women concerned events pertaining to one's job. The women in the Couples in Transition project endorsed these concerns most frequently.

Discussion

Although both the Couples in Transition participants and the couples who have recently given birth to their first child are in major life transitions, in the samples of couples examined here the amount of presumptive life stress is significantly greater for the couples with one partner entering graduate school. It is now important to begin to understand the differences between various life transitions. It seems to us that for the graduate student couples their changes primarily involve losses rather than additions. Partners in the life transition to parenthood often say the birth of a child draws them together as they share the new enterprise, although they too experience some loss associated with their restricted life style. The graduate student couples' changes involve ones that may draw the partners apart at the beginning.

Another difference may be that the graduate student couples have just left their

support networks thousands of miles away and therefore find most events more stressful.

An interesting finding of this study was that the women in the graduate student couples were significantly more concerned about jobs than the women in the other two groups. Since these women were the non-academic member of the couple, the finding was congruent with other studies suggesting that women who recently took a job or were unemployed after previously being employed had the greatest stress levels. This is especially relevant in view of the fact that most of the new mothers were no longer working, but presumably this was a more voluntary condition.

The concerns of the graduate student couples constellated in specific areas. These concerns need to be considered in the development of interventions for these couples, and were in the groups formed at our Clinic. The areas of concern were ones involving their relationships, their jobs and their friendships. We feel that these concerns should be directly targeted for discussion in any group intervention. As we understand more about the stresses associated with specific life transitions, we can begin to develop strategies aimed at helping people preserve their relationships while going through life changes, and help them develop stronger self and couple identities as a result of their successful negotiations during stressful times.

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